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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the tactics used by the Showmen's Guild of Australasia in successfully lobbying for the development of a distance education program for their children. The Guild is considered to be a "marginalized" group, meaning members have less access to wealth, power, and status. Since 1930, members of the Showmen's Guild and their families have traveled from town to town providing agricultural and equestrian shows. Despite the diversity of backgrounds and experiences among people connected with the show circuit, the Guild is highly organized and has been politically active. Informal sanctions have been effective in enforcing group discipline and in presenting the image of a single body of opinion. In addition, investment in sophisticated machinery and technology has resulted in show people having the financial resources to buy homes and have a political voice via more "normalized channels." Although members learn early that they are a marginalized group and are perceived as different from the mainstream, the group maintains close ties and often celebrates its difference. Implications for educational program development center on the goals of educational programs designed for disadvantaged groups, and the status of other marginalized groups and their efforts to contest their marginalized status. (LP)

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MARGINS WITHIN MARGINS?: VOICES SPEAKING THROUGH A STUDY OF THE PROVISION OF AN EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM FOR THE CHILDREN OF ONE AUSTRALIAN SHOW CIRCUIT

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

For the past two years a group of researchers from the University of Central Queensland has been studying aspects of an educational program designed for children of the Showmen's Guild of Australasia involved in the northern coastal `run' or circuit.

In some ways, the study has resembled a walk through a rainforest. Initially the combination of birds calling, grass rustling, and water flowing assaults the ear drums in an undifferentiated barrage of noise. As the walk proceeds, these different sounds resolve into more readily identifiable voices of individuals and groups inhabiting the forest.

Similarly this study began with the researchers expecting to find a disadvantaged group of itinerant people participating in a program intended to address their itinerancy. It became quickly apparent that highly articulate and well organised members of this group were actually responsible for lobbying the Queensland Department of Education to establish a program to meet their clearly formulated needs and expectations.

A more recent stage of the study has suggested that reconceptualising `disadvantaged group' as `minority but politically active group' is simplistic. It appears that there are `marginalised groups within marginalised groups', whose members have widely ranging experiences and aspirations, and whose voices are heard with varying degrees of clarity and understanding. This situation has implications both for educational programs prepared for participants in the show circuit and for future stages of this study.

MARGINS WITHIN MARGINS?: VOICES SPEAKING THROUGH A STUDY OF THE PROVISION OF AN EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM FOR THE CHILDREN OF ONE AUSTRALIAN SHOW CIRCUIT[1]

INTRODUCTION

The construction of the binary category `margins-mainstream' brings to mind a host of other opposed labels: `female-male', `black-white', `working class-middle class', `ill-well', `old-young'. In common with these other pairs, `itinerant-resident' (or its variations, such as `mobile-fixed' and `transient-permanent') suggests that many people find their identities formed and confirmed by not being like `the other'. The negative connotations of itinerancy - being shiftless, unreliable, possibly criminal, and without any emotional or financial stake in contributing to and sustaining a particular community - are contrasted with the positive effects of living in one place for an extended period.[2]

This argument implies that incarnations of `the other' are inherently weaker, and have less access to wealth, power, and status, than their semantic opposites. Certainly serious inequities exist in Australia, whereby some groups are denied access to employment, educational, medical, and similar services that are taken for granted by others. Yet to accept the intrinsic `disadvantage' of being female, black, old, or itinerant is a highly questionable position to adopt. For one thing, it could conceivably help to perpetuate the inequalities that one is decrying. For another, it ignores two key features of these so called `marginalised groups': their heterogeneity, and their capacity for engaging in all manner of subversive, appropriating,

[1]The writers acknowledge gratefully the willing assistance of members of the Showmen's Guild of Australasia and staff members of the School of Distance Education in Brisbane. Interviews were transcribed by Mr Geoffrey Danaher, Ms Bonita Frank, and Ms Pam Gale. The research was funded by a University of Central Queensland Research Grant (**ER/U/399**), awarded through the Research Centre for Open and Distance Learning. Ms Leonie Rowan provided invaluable comments on an earlier draft of this paper. The writers accept responsibility for the views expressed in the paper.

[2]For discussions of other binaries, see Bhabha (1990, p. 77), Clifford (1990, pp. 146-147), Mercer (1990, p. 249), Spivak (1990, pp. 387-389), and West (1990, pp. 29-30).

and redefining tactics designed to render problematic the `margins-mainstream' dichotomy.[3]

This paper is concerned with the issues involved in labelling as `marginalised' a particular itinerant group, the Showmen's Guild of Australasia. After a discussion of background information about the Guild's northern coastal `run' or circuit, reference is made to selected concepts of marginalisation and to the methodology underlying the study. The substantive section of the paper reveals the heterogeneity of the group being described, as well as the political, economic, and social tactics in which show people engage to gain access to what they perceive as `cultural capital' while retaining their distinctive identity. The paper concludes by considering the implications of this situation for both educational programs designed for `disadvantaged' groups and future stages of this research project.

BACKGROUND

One of the major events on the annual calendar of many of the towns and cities throughout Australia is the agricultural show. Most people have attended a show at least once in their lives, but few know what life is like for those itinerant workers and their families who travel from show to show for most of the year to provide the entertainment, such as the rides and the side show alleys.

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[3]When using the term `tactics' in this paper, the writers follow the distinction between this word and `strategies' outlined by de Certeau (1984, p. xix):

> I call a "strategy" the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an "environment". A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as *proper*...and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it (competitors, adversaries, "clienteles", "targets", or "objects" of research). Political, economic, and scientific rationality has been constructed on this strategic model.
>
> I call a "tactic", on the other hand, a calculus which cannot count on a "proper" (a spatial or institutional localisation), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality. The place of a tactic belongs to the other. A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalise on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances. The "proper" is a victory of space over time. On the contrary, because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time - it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized "on the wing". Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into "opportunities". The weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them...

These groups of people have been around for a long time. In the 1930s, the association of these workers was formalised with the establishment of the Showmen's Guild of Australasia. Membership was restricted to people who had been born into show life, but recently the rules have been altered so that anyone who has been working local shows for three years or more can apply for membership of the Guild.

A study of the infrastructure among the show workers reveals considerable cohesiveness as well as some differences. Family is very important, as are inter-familial associations. For example, husbands and wives make distinct contributions to the running of family businesses and their children are known to all in the circuit. In this environment the children are `watched over' by an `extended family' and, as far as possible, their safety is assured. On another level, there are different categories of workers on the circuit, and this produces certain types of hierarchical relationships. Not only are there the owners of the businesses on one hand and the employees on the other, but also different categories of workers are assigned labels such as `itinerants' and `horsy people'.

One of the consequences of the establishment of the Guild has been the high level of organisation that it has brought to the group. Members of the Guild have become accustomed to speaking for themselves and representing themselves to show officials. This experience and expertise has proved to be useful in lobbying for the improvement of the educational opportunities of their children. Until 1989, when they were in Queensland the children of the Showmen's Guild either undertook correspondence lessons, were sent to boarding school, or lived with other relatives so that they could attend school regularly.

The children who travelled with their parents on the show circuits had a richness (in a range of contexts) to their education unavailable to children living in one place. Instead of learning about the world from where they lived, these children had the opportunity to see much of that world at first hand. This advantage was, however, perhaps offset by the tremendous difficulties associated with trying to complete correspondence lessons while also living an itinerant lifestyle. The constant disruptions of travel, the difficulty of finding a quiet place to work without distractions, and not having ready access to teacher help could make academic progress very uncertain.

In 1989, the Queensland Department of Education, in response to lobbying by some of the members of the Showmen's Guild, introduced an innovative way of delivering primary

schooling to children who travelled the show circuits with their parents. When these families remain in a town for a week or more, they are often joined by teachers from the Brisbane School of Distance Education. These teachers arrive at the local school and set up a classroom, where they are met by the children from the show. During these times, the children are taught in a regular but intense school situation. The teacher-student ratio is extremely favourable, as home tutors also join in. One of the great benefits of these situations is that the home tutors can receive help and ideas from the distance education teachers about how best to implement the program and work through the correspondence lessons until the teachers and students meet up again at one of the eighteen cities or towns to which the teachers travel. When the teachers are at their base in Brisbane, they can also be contacted on an 008 number for the price of a local call. In short, when they are in Queensland the children of the show workers can now enjoy the richness that the itinerant life offers and remain with their families, while at the same time benefiting from regular, face to face contact with teachers.

MARGINALISATION

The lobbying in which some members of the Showmen's Guild of Australasia engaged, in order to improve educational opportunities for their children, is an example of the ability of one `marginalised' group to develop a strong position in relation to the mainstream.[4] Rowan's (1993a, p. 68) point that being marginalised does not always mean that the group has to be "helpless, passive or defenceless" is true of the Guild. This group speaks the same `language' (in terms of being articulate and communicative) as the dominant group, as evidenced by its success in expressing the educational needs of its children. The Guild has also had the advantage of a `passage' through the ranks by a highly placed member of the Queensland cabinet, who was once one of them and who has remained loyal to and, therefore, understanding of the position of the Showmen's Guild in relation to the education of their children and the difficulties inherent in their situation.

Perhaps the similarities between the Showmen's Guild and the mainstream are more powerful than the differences which could define the Guild as marginalised. For example, the educational

[4]As Ferguson (1990, p. 9) points out, part of the difficulty in discussing marginalisation is in identifying the "hidden place" from which "power is exercised":

> When we try to pin it down, the centre always seems to be somewhere else. Yet we know that this phantom centre, elusive as it is, exerts a real, undeniable power over the whole social framework of our culture, and over the ways that we think about it.

level of some Guild members is quite advanced (a few have university degrees), while many of them are highly skilled at public relations. It is possible, however, that the mainstream "will embrace `token' views and representatives in order to better exclude their `difference'" (Rowan, 1993b).

Tokenisms can certainly create divisions within the margins (Rowan, 1993a, p. 71), and it is interesting to see where the Showmen's Guild stands in this regard. For example, there are many groups in Queensland that cannot gain access to education in the usual way. Should the new, improved type of educational services now made available to the children of the Showmen's Guild also be accessible to other groups? If the show children are seen by other groups to be privileged or to be the receivers of tokens, will this create division among groups with similar needs? In the future, where does the Guild's successful lobbying leave it in relation to other `marginalised' groups that take part in distance education? Will there be (has there been) a divide and fall?[5]

Rowan argues that one of the problems with universities researching marginalised groups is that those groups may then be seen and heard but "still not taken seriously" (1991, p. 12).[6] One difference with the Showmen's Guild and the study conducted with their co-operation by researchers at the University of Central Queensland is that Guild members had already been seen, heard, and taken seriously before the study began. The project looked at the actions taken by the Guild, and also at the changes in delivering distance education to the show children. In other words, the researchers examined what appeared to be a successful lobby by a `marginalised' group and the effects that this had on their lives.

Whereas it has been theorised (Rowan, 1993a) that the marginalised are often denied the opportunity to speak for themselves, Guild members have been able to do this and to do it

[5]According to Gayatri Spivak (1990, p. 381):
The putative centre welcomes selective inhabitants of the margin in order better to exclude the margin. And it is the centre that offers the official explanation; or, the centre is defined and reproduced by the explanation that it can express.

[6]This brings to mind Russell Ferguson's wryly perceptive comment (1990, p. 11):
Many have actively sought isolation from the rest of society, whether in bohemian garrets or ivory towers. This tradition inevitably creates an ambiguous relationship with those who have not chosen marginalisation, but have had it thrust upon them.

successfully. Rather than not having a voice, having been silenced, or simply not being listened to, these people have spoken, have been heard, and have improved their position considerably. This success relates both to their perception of their current position and that position's acceptance by the `centre' or mainstream. The question remains whether this improved position will lead to equivalent `favours' being granted to similar groups, or alternatively whether the Guild will incur the disfavour of those groups.

METHOD

In 1992, a group of researchers from the Faculty of Education at the University of Central Queensland began a study to examine the new ways in which education was being delivered to the children on the show circuit, and the circumstances in which this education took place. This type of distance education was new and had not been studied before. The opportunity to conduct interviews *in situ* had the potential to provide exciting insights into a range of areas connected with the implementation of this new program.

The method used by these researchers is the grounded theory originated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and updated by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Grounded theory is a method of qualitative research in which, rather than gathering evidence to support a preconceived hypothesis, the researcher builds the theory from the phenomena by discovering, developing, and tentatively verifying knowledge about them. Grounded theory assumes that not all the concepts have been identified prior to the research being conducted, or that these concepts have not previously been adequately understood or developed. Alternatively, the research questions may not have been asked in the same way before.

A qualitative research method is particularly appropriate to the study of the Showmen's Guild, because of the emphasis on allowing the informants to speak for themselves, as well as the contribution that this is making to the building of theory. The research project recognises the point made by Strauss, that people can be agents of change within their worlds and that life is variable and complex. It also reflects Glaser's contention that investigators using grounded theory are interested in producing research that is useful to both professionals and lay people (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Another feature of grounded theory relevant here is that it can be used in a multidisciplinary approach, with different members of the research team making varied contributions and the resultant theory reflecting a range of perspectives. That has certainly been the case with the researchers into the Showmen's Guild study.

TACTICS OF SHOW PEOPLE SPEAKING FOR THEMSELVES

Political

Despite considerable diversity of backgrounds and experiences among people connected with the show circuit, the Showmen's Guild is able to speak with a unified voice. Informal sanctions are very effective in enforcing group discipline and in presenting the image of a single body of opinion. The Guild exercises control over matters ranging from negotiating tent sites with district show authorities, to deciding how much space each caravan can occupy on the showground, to resolving habitual dog fights in side show alley, to policing disputes among individual humans (sometimes concluded by the power of the fist).

A `tried and true' political tactic is to form alliances with powerful individuals and groups. The former Guild member who is now a cabinet minister is a case in point. Similarly, some Guild members have joined forces with staff members of the School of Distance Education to lobby the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education, and Training, in an attempt both to secure long term funding for the program and its expansion to other Australian States. At the same time, lobbying is being directed at appropriate officials in the New South Wales and Victorian Governments, with the same objective in mind.

Although it has not been an explicit focus of research in the study thus far, the predominance of women in the two roles of educator and lobbyist has emerged from the findings to date. In the words of one of the School of Distance Education teachers:

> I think a number of women who were Guild members lobbied hard and strong to get a program like this up and running. Through their hard work they have achieved a lot.

The same teacher referred to the organisational skills of this group of women:

> ...that's often the only way to get it done, unless you've got a mum who's prepared to take time away from work and do that, because they are very busy, very businesslike in their approach to their jobs, and very efficient.

Economic

The Showmen's Guild has changed its economic base significantly in recent years. The older members recall vividly the years of uncomfortable circuit travel by train. `Joints' were simple in nature and relied heavily on manual operation. Showmen were acrobats, jugglers, clowns, and physical `freaks' (`the fat lady', `the tall lady', `the Siamese twins'). A twelve year old boy

explained:

> Frankie Foster, that was my great grandfather. Before that they used to own tent shows and shows where they pay money to go inside and get entertained - they were all actors.

Today, by contrast, `state of the art' technology has provided the showmen with highly technological means of earning their living. Dodgem cars, ferris wheels, and `force ten' rides have shifted the economic base of operations from manual operation to sophisticated machinery. `Joints' have become businesses, in a very different way from even ten years ago. Considerable financial investment has been injected into capital equipment, and work has become compartmentalised.

A female member of the Guild addressed some of the issues of the family ownership of many show businesses:

> We've got the ferris wheel, and it's obvious you can't have a young kid putting up a ferris wheel. Like ticket box work and all, that's fine. From our point of view, we don't employ children to work on the ride. From a safety aspect, from all that sort of aspect. So it's a bit hard up to now in that way to give [Jason][7] sort of hands on responsibilities. He could work the ticket box no problem. We also, we don't work games a lot, but we do at a few capital [city] shows, we sort of work games. And no problem at all for him to come in to relieve and sort of doing things. I don't believe in putting children into this sort of work too early to burn them out.

It could be contended that this newly directed economic base has given many show people the financial resources to claim a voice through many `normalised' channels, such as buying houses, work, recreation, and education. In the previous interview extract, the speaker indicates that something akin to an apprenticeship takes place from a very early age to induct children fully into the business of the show circuit.

Social

Collectively and individually, the `showies' learn early that they are a marginalised group

[7]In keeping with common practice in reporting the results of qualitative research, the names of individuals have been changed to protect their privacy.

whose members are perceived as different from the rest of the community. One child responded to the question about how well he related to other children at school:

> Some of them are nice, some of them - well, the teacher reckons they're jealous of what we do. And they sort of say, "Oh, you're showies", stuff like that. Sometimes the kids have fights with them.

An itinerant teacher confirmed this early recognition of difference:

> They normally tend to stick to themselves when they come into school, normally because the school kids perceive them to be something different, and there's just a misconception among a lot of people about showmen's people, they're rough and ready and what not. And in some cases they are. Not normally the Guild members, not the itinerant workers who work and do the circuit, they're different, but sometimes the itinerants who just come into town and they'll pick up a casual job or whatever, that's different. So they get a bit of a rough time at school sometimes, and they're made to feel different, and they react...

This isolation has made even more important the relationships within the show circuit itself. These relationships sustain people who are on the move for much of the year. They also reduce the emotional dependence of show children on the non-itinerant students at the schools that they visit. While they are generally friendly, their unique experiences and the close knit nature of their community do not incline them to invest time in forming friendships with children whom they will not see for another year, and perhaps not even then.

Another tactic for sustaining their cultural uniqueness is to appropriate celebrations from the mainstream community and give them a characteristic twist. Birthday parties, `showies'' picnics, and even `showies' State of Origin' football matches are celebrated and contested with a vigour to match that of non-mobile groups.

In this context of celebrating signs of difference, some covert pressure is applied to show people not to leave the fold. Although many parents profess an encouragement of their children to consider a wide range of career options, there is evidence of a widespread assumption among both groups that the children will continue the family - and the community - tradition. One mother reflected on her teenage daughter's choice to leave the show circuit:

> And when [Joanne] decided that she didn't want to [continue], that sort of throws you a little bit. Then you go somewhere, you know it is some kind of

> showmen's turn, be it a 21st birthday or be it whatever, and you'll see someone there, and they'll have their children around and probably their grandkids and whatever you don't [have], [and] you think, "My kids should be here too". And you feel like you miss out a little bit.

IMPLICATIONS

There are at least two important implications of the argument presented in this paper. Firstly, from the viewpoint of designers of educational programs for `marginalised' groups such as itinerant children, they need to make explicit whether they are presenting in potentially different formats essentially the same information as that received by students in non-itinerant schooling settings, or alternatively whether they are responding to the particular needs and aspirations of the various groups with which they are dealing. At the heart of this question lies the issue of control. Are the representatives of the `mainstream' incorporating the marginalised group into the centre, or are they providing their members with just enough `cultural capital' to keep them `on side', while effectively perpetuating those differences that render them marginal?[8] At the same time, are members of the marginalised group lobbying government officials to gain access to items of `cultural capital', thereby taking advantage of a situation in which they can simultaneously remain different and enjoy the fruits of `life in the mainstream' that are denied to other marginalised groups? These are complex questions, as indicated by the fact that the study reported here presents evidence that can support most, if not all, of the alternative positions outlined in this paragraph.[9]

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[8]Another logical possibility is that decision makers in the Queensland Department of Education are putting into practice elements of "the new cultural politics of difference", which in Cornel West's (1990, p. 19) view are

> ...to trash the monolithic and homogeneous in the name of diversity, multiplicity, and heterogeneity; to reject the abstract, general, and universal in light of the concrete, specific, and particular; and to historicise, contextualise, and pluralise by highlighting the contingent, provisional, variable, tentative, shifting, and changing.

[9]Note de Certeau's cautiously optimistic tone in his essay `The politics of silence: The long march of the Indians" (1986, p. 231):

> It is as though the opportunity for a sociopolitical renewal of Western societies were emerging along its fringes, precisely where it has been the most oppressive. Out of what Western societies have held in contempt, combated and believed they had subjugated, there are arising political alternatives and social models which represent, perhaps the only hope for reversing the massive acceleration and reproduction of totalitarian, homogenising effects generated by the power structures and technology of the West.

Secondly, the recognition of the heterogeneity of the show people, and of the tactics by at least some of them for gaining access to items of `cultural capital', prompts the researchers to ponder possible future directions for the study. For one thing, it should encourage us to redouble our efforts to record the perceptions of people who are involved in the show circuit but not members of the Showmen's Guild, as a set of voices as yet unheard in this project. For another, it should provide a potentially fruitful line of inquiry about the focus of comparative studies. For example, previously unconsidered research questions to address to other itinerant groups could concentrate on such issues as the locus of control in any specialised education program in which they might be involved, and the tactics available to them for contesting their marginalised status.

CONCLUSION

Rowan (1991, p. 5) has pointed out, ". . . the more negative characteristics that can be matched with a person (the more marks of difference that can be identified) then the lower down the hierarchy that person will be placed". This paper has developed - in a particular context - part of the implication of that claim: the notion that there are degrees or `layers' of disadvantage or marginalisation.[10] The `margins within margins' evident in the northern coastal `run' of the Australian show circuit encapsulate the three major themes elaborated here: the considerable heterogeneity of the group under review; members' tactics to gain access to particular educational services for their children; and practices designed to celebrate and perpetuate aspects of their identity that mark their `difference'. While we do not claim that all the voices

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It remains to be seen whether the educational "fringes" constituted by open and distance learning will be the sites of greater tolerance of diversity or moves to increased homogeneity.

[10]The writers are grateful for Rowan's insight (1993b) that the paper has highlighted as well "layers" of resistance and subversion. The ambivalence and ambiguity, whereby a single act can be variously interpreted as a strategy of marginalisation and a tactic of subversion, is pinpointed by Bourdieu (1990, p. 155):

> When the dominated quest for distinction leads the dominated to affirm what distinguishes them, that is, that in the name of which they are dominated and constituted as vulgar, do we have to talk of resistance? In other words, if, in order to resist, I have no other resource than to lay claim to that in the name of which I am dominated, is this resistance? Second question: when, on the other hand, the dominated work at destroying what marks them out as `vulgar' (for instance, in France, the Parisian accent), is this submission? I think this is an insoluble contradiction: this contradiction, which is inscribed into the very logic of symbolic dominations, is something those who talk about `popular culture' won't admit. Resistance may be alienating and submission may be liberating.

speaking in this project have been heard, we have distinguished a greater range of speech acts than when we conducted the pilot study eighteen months ago.

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